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The Impossibility of Donald Trump's "Religious Freedom"

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One week after the release of the infamous *Access Hollywood* recordings of Donald Trump making suggestive remarks about women by *The Washington Post*, the then-presidential candidate found a surprising ally: Reverend Franklin Graham, son of famed televangelist Billy Graham. In a [Facebook post](#), the younger Graham asserted to his more than [6.37 million](#) Facebook followers that the election was bigger than any one candidate's conduct. Instead, he argued, the country needed to elect someone whom "they trust to nominate men and women to the court who will defend the constitution and support religious freedoms," referring to Supreme Court nominations.

Though he did not specifically state which candidate he supported, the answer was fairly clear when he prayed "that Christians will not be deceived by the liberal media about what is at stake for future generations."

In the years leading up to the 2016 presidential election, American evangelicals brewed over former President Barack Obama's "[war on religion](#)." Though he was very open about his Christian faith, many saw Obama's defense of reproductive and LGBT rights as a threat to the moral well-being of America and evidence that he was not a true Christian. Such animosity was exactly what made Donald Trump so appealing to them as a candidate.

In the end, 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for him, riding the wave of support straight into the White House. It didn't take very long for the new president to reward the efforts of those who had provided such a strong base for his campaign.

On May 4 of last year, Trump signed an executive order relaxing IRS enforcement of the Johnson Amendment, which prohibited tax-exempt religious organizations from publicly participating in political speech and activity. On October 6, he moved to roll back the controversial Obamacare contraception mandate, resulting in several ongoing lawsuits.

That same day, the Department of Justice released two controversial memos which gave federal agencies guidance as to how they should protect religious freedoms, including allowing employers to “employ only persons whose beliefs and conduct are consistent with the employers’ religious precepts.” It incited instant backlash amid concerns that such an interpretation would allow for unprecedented discrimination.

Finally, the administration has been vocal in its support for Jack Phillips. Phillips, a Colorado baker, is now at the center of the battle over religious freedom after refusing to make a wedding cake for a gay couple. His case is currently being heard by the Supreme Court.

It is no secret that religion is deeply embedded in American culture. The nation's roots of religious freedom began with the First Amendment's establishment that there shall be no official religion established by the government and that no person can be prohibited from exercising his or her own religious beliefs. Today, roughly 89 percent of U.S. adults say that they believe in God, more than in any other major industrialized nation. The first Thursday of May has been a National Day of Prayer since 1952. Congress opens its daily sessions with prayer.

America tends to be praised by its own citizens as an example of what religious freedom looks like, now more than ever. What it fails to recognize, however, is its own hypocrisy.

The evangelical portrait of Christianity as a victim of progressivism fails to acknowledge its perpetual status as a power stronghold in America. In a 2016 open letter on his family website, Reverend Graham asserted that the “persecution of Christians is escalating worldwide,” including in the United States.

There's more than enough evidence to support the claim that there is an ongoing attack on Christians in the Middle East. Just last year, ISIS bombed two Egyptian churches on Palm Sunday, killing at least 45 people. In late December, 9 were killed in an attack on Coptic Christians in Cairo.

It's disturbing to see the expansion of LGBTQ and reproductive rights in the United States being compared to such horrific events in the Middle East.

Graham also made the point that American believers are "a target of a culture that has turned its back on Almighty God," something "driven by progressives" and "LGBT activists." Yet, he doesn't mention the fact that 70 percent of Americans identify as Christians, or that 68 percent of white mainline Protestants support same-sex marriage.

The issue has never been about America abandoning its supposed faith in God. It's about the abandonment of a particular interpretation of Christianity that many believe to be marginalizing towards religious conservatives and antithetical to the teachings of Christ. In 2013, the Public Religion Research Institute reported that 23 percent of millennials identify as progressive Christians. America is not turning its back on God, but is instead embracing an interpretation of Christianity that is more accepting than the religious conservatism that was more dominant several decades ago.

In an article for *The Huffington Post*, Lydia Sohn, a Methodist pastor, describes her own experience with learning to identify as a progressive Christian and gives historical context to the movement.

"This is a form of Christianity that seeks to honor all narratives, especially those from colonized and marginalized voices," she writes. "(Progressive Christianity) sees itself as simply one perspective in a world of many beautiful religious traditions where there is much to be gained through inter-religious dialogue and cooperation."

It's a Christian movement that is bothered by the idea of women being denied contraception. It takes issue with the fact that there was a 19 percent increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes in 2016 and sees hypocrisy in Trump's attempted ban on immigration from predominantly Muslim countries. It accepts the notion of LGBTQ equality that has been ignored for decades.

It's a challenge to those who feel that Christianity is the foundation of America itself and should be treated as such, despite the fact that former President John Adams himself signed The Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1797, which declared in Article 11 that "the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion."

America is a secular state. Plain and simple. In its earliest years as a nation, the U.S. set itself apart from the global stage with the First Amendment's guarantee that "Congress should make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," which was written to ensure the separation

of church and state. Despite that necessary separation, all hell seems to break loose when public schools and government buildings are kept secular.

Ultimately, religious freedom will remain a part of the foundation of what sets America apart from so much of the world, as it should. Diversity of belief is something that should be celebrated and protected at all costs. But the dream of a Christian America that is being fought for by Trump and some of his most religious followers will remain only that -- a dream.

American culture today places an unrelenting value on total autonomy, equality, and freedom, and, despite the opinions of some that such values go against the foundation of our nation, it will continue to do so.

Culture

religion, first amendment, civil liberties



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